Easing the Transition from Japanese High School to University Level Communicative EFL Classes.

高校の英語授業から大学のコミュニケーション・クラスへの移行：学生への負担をより少なくする方法

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要約：
英語Ｉ：コミュニケーションを担当している特任外国語講師の先生は、クラス・アクティビティーに消極的にしか参加しない学生に対してフラストレーションを感じることが多い。授業準備にかなりの労力と時間を費やした後、学生から思った通りの反応が得られなければ、がっかりするのは当然である。しかし、先生は学生の今までの経験を充分に理解した上で授業の計画を立てているだろうか。コミュニカティブ・メソッドは他のさまざまな教育法などと同様に、ある種の、文化に基づいた考え方や行動パターンを想定している。コミュニカティブ・メソッドに基づいた英語教育は今まで学生が受けてきた授業とあまりにも違うことが多いので学生は当惑させられることがある。本稿では、こういった学生のために、大学のＥＦＬクラスでコミュニカティブ・メソッドを徐々に導入することを勧める。このアプローチには二通りある。一つはＥＦＬのクラス・アクティビティーの根底にある教育理念を学生に充分説明すること。もう一つは、始めから学生の自主的発言を期待するのではなく、それを徐々に導入する方法である。

Introduction

In order to foster communicative skills as effectively as possible, at first teachers need to pay particular attention to the characteristics of the typical Japanese student. Properly understanding who they are and what they are capable of from the first class is fundamental to the success of the course.

With no direct, personal experience of the Japanese education system, foreign teachers of English at Japanese universities tend to rely on “received wisdom” for an understanding of what it entails. Typically, one hears that until recently students have only learned grammar at secondary school level, that they generally find this boring, and that there is a move towards communicative teaching these days. With this kind of information as a basis, teachers may be tempted to conclude

that helping their students become communicatively competent will be a simple matter of redressing the balance; of providing more opportunities for interaction through fluency-based activities. Thinking along such lines would not, however, reflect an adequate grasp of the context.

The more one reads about English language education, and education in general, in Japanese Junior High and High Schools, the easier it is to understand the apparently negative attitude of many of our students. I say "apparently", because I'm not convinced the majority of students have poor attitudes, or those that do are irreversibly "lost". On the contrary, I would argue that a significant number of them are confused by the contrast between the rigid, form-focused classes that they have become accustomed to and the more creative, fluency-focused approaches they encounter at university. They simply cannot understand what is taking place in the classroom, or what is expected of them.

Therefore, in this essay I intend to argue that teachers could help their students greatly by spending more time trying to bridge the gap between high school and university classes. In other words, they need, firstly, to reflect on what the Japanese education system entails. Having done so, teachers would be better able to understand their students, and perhaps take more care in explaining the rationale behind communicative language teaching activities and theory (not once or twice, but repeatedly). This would also mean taking absolutely no knowledge or understanding on the part of the students for granted (what seems blatantly obvious to the teacher is not always so for the student), and taking a small step at a time (not expecting much spontaneity at first).

The Education System

To begin with, let us consider the Japanese education system and the type of student it tends to produce. English language instruction in Japanese secondary schools has traditionally consisted of the grammar-translation approach, with a large proportion of time spent on rote memorization. Students are forced to remember large amounts of vocabulary and grammar rules for regurgitation on university entrance exams, most of which proves to be utterly useless as preparation for trying to communicate in English. After six years of study, the majority of students seem to have difficulty communicating at even the most fundamental level.

These days, the Japanese public appears to be well aware of the shortcomings of studying English in this way. The resulting outcry, along with the ongoing embarrassment of lagging behind other Asian nations in English proficiency test scores, has compelled the Ministry of Education to pay lip service to the idea of teaching English communicatively. The 1989 "Course of Study"

guidelines state that English education should foster student's motivation and interest in learning about other cultures, as well as enable them to understand and express basic English, by working on all four skill areas equally. In reality, however, the types of university entrance exams that students have to prepare for remain unchanged. Hence, teachers feel obliged to continue with the same old methods. In a series of observations and interviews with a number of high school teachers, Sakui (2004: 157) found that "teachers spent most of the class time involved in teacher-fronted grammar explanations, chorus reading, and vocabulary presentations". Further evidence of this came to light in a recent "Letter to the Editor" of The Daily Yomiuri (July 18, 2004) from a trainee teacher, a Mr. Michinishi, who complained thus:

> "From my university course on teaching methods, I gathered that today's high schools were teaching communicative English and had made oral communication compulsory. But to my surprise, the high school I visited did not teach oral communication-it was still teaching grammar and other things that are more relevant to university entrance examinations. I cannot accept this situation".

Other points to emerge from Sakui's study were that many Japanese teachers seem confused about how to implement a communicative lesson, and lack confidence in their own English speaking abilities. However, it is unrealistic to hope for progress in these areas as long as the style of questioning pertaining to English on entrance exams continues in its current form.

Sadly, the problem in English education is only symptomatic of a deeper crisis in the education system as a whole. In recent years, some Japanese scholars have begun to assert openly that the real, underlying goal of education is to enforce obedience and conformity. As Miyamoto puts it, (in Kerr 2001: 285):

> "Driving through the English countryside, you see many sheep grazing on the hillside, which brings a feeling of peacefulness. This peacefulness is exactly what the bureaucrats want to obtain in Japanese society. But I want to emphasize that they want this peacefulness because their ideal image of the public is one where people are submissive and subservient. With such a group, people are easy to control, and the system does not have to change. How do the bureaucrats manage to castrate the Japanese so effectively? The school system is the place where they conduct this process".

Whether one agrees completely with the strength of Miyamoto's analysis or not, there can be no denying its general validity. From their first day of school, Japanese children are subjected to an array of rules and regimens, such as beginning each class by standing by their desks "at attention", marching and exercising in the playground in unison, having to listen to a regular barrage of loudspeaker announcements, and so on. They may only change uniforms (from, say, winter to

spring) on a particular appointed date, regardless of weather conditions. Teachers assign students to groups *(kumi)* in which they study, play, and eat together until graduation. In this kind of environment, any child who stands out in any way at all, physically or emotionally, is a ripe target for bullies. The intensity of the bullying nowadays tends to be such that suicide (as the only means of escape) is not especially unusual among its victims. Teachers always claim to be concerned about bullying, but in fact many cases of teachers either tolerating or actively encouraging bullying have come to light in recent years. In fact, a survey of teachers from all over the country conducted at the 1996 Japan Teachers' Union meeting found that only 11 percent felt bullies should be suspended.

This gives rise to situations in which students who actually have some English communication skills (perhaps by having spent some time living abroad, or just by being naturally inquisitive, creative young people) pretend to be less competent than they really are. By doing so, they avoid standing out. To stand out in any way is hazardous for students, as it invites ridicule and being ostracized from the group. Questions are definitely not encouraged. Classroom discussion, debating, or analysis of information is virtually unheard of. On the contrary, students learn to try to remain as invisible as possible. The school system teaches children to view the teacher as the fountain of wisdom and themselves as passive vessels waiting to be filled. They are told to memorize countless numbers of unconnected facts, as well as to strive for total accuracy (and therefore come to dread making mistakes).

As if experiencing that kind of classroom environment on a daily basis wasn't bad enough, students also have to contend with the reality that the facts taught in school are often different to the facts university entrance exams test for. Therefore, most students attend an extra two to four hours of cram school *(juku)* after school to learn another set of facts. Basically, students are constantly busy, which "successfully eliminates any time for independent interests and results in constant fatigue" (Kerr 2004: 296). In effect, therefore, getting through the Japanese education system amounts to a matter of endurance and survival. Miyamoto, (in Kerr 2004: 301), goes as far as to claim that "by the time he reaches 18, the Japanese child has become a perfect sheep". That may be debatable, but, to say the least, "the national aspiration in Japan towards conformity and compliance to social expectations does little to foster a classroom atmosphere conducive to foreign language learning" (Martin 2004: 51). In the past decade numerous politicians, including some recent Prime Ministers, have been openly critical of the education system for these very reasons, yet they seem to lack the power, or the sincere will, to bring about any true reform.

Responding to the Challenge

It is against this backdrop, then, that teachers have to plan an appropriate approach. Towards the end of the first semester, while reflecting on this topic, it occurred to me that despite our efforts at the beginning of the English Communication course to outline how we intend to help them become more communicatively competent, some of the students must have remained puzzled. I began to suspect the vastness of the gap between their experience of education in secondary school and the basic communicative course we were implementing was such that they would benefit from regularly repeated, simple explanations of the language learning principles underlying the tasks. Moreover, I felt that their motivation to participate actively in the classes would increase if they understood the way in which the tasks were designed to be helpful to them. This has sometimes been referred to as "perceived value". As Williams and Burden (1997: 125) put it, "the greater the value that individuals attach to the accomplishment of or involvement in an activity, the more highly motivated they will be to engage in it initially, and later to put sustained effort into succeeding in the activity".

In order to look for some evidence to support for my idea, I compiled a simple questionnaire (included as Appendix 1), and distributed it to my students at the end of the semester. Extracting reliable data from Japanese students can be problematic, as there is always a suspicion that they will try to give the responses they think the teacher wants. To minimize this factor as much as possible, I instructed students not to write their names on the paper, and left the room while they completed it. I had a statement written in Japanese at the top of the questionnaire explaining that it was purely for research purposes and requesting students to give honest answers. The questions were translated into Japanese as well to ensure that they understood them. In all, there were 244 respondents.

It could not be claimed the survey was comprehensive or foolproof, but the results generally seem to confirm my impressions. Item 1 was simply intended to give an overall picture of the level of student satisfaction with the course. In all, 84 percent of students claimed to enjoy their English Communication class a little more (35%) or much more (49%) than their high school classes. To my mind, this generally positive response serves to increase the credibility of any mild criticisms to arise in the remainder of the questionnaire. If the students had hated the course, they might have been critical of anything.

The response to Item 2 seems to confirm the findings of Sakui and others regarding the implementation of communicative methods in secondary schools. Ninety percent rated the activities as a little different (32%) or very different (58%) to what they had previously experienced.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from the finding for Item 3 that sixty-seven percent were a little surprised or very surprised (59% and 8% respectively) by the kinds of activities they had to do. It could also be interpreted as a first warning of the need for special care to be given to explaining the philosophy underlying the activities.

Somewhat contrary to my expectations, in response to Item 4 almost all students claimed that in the first few weeks of the course they understood the purpose of the activities either a little or quite well (a perfect 50-50 split). Nevertheless, Item 5 revealed that sixty-three percent felt they understood the purpose much better by the end of the semester. When explicitly asked on Item 6 whether they would have liked more time to be spent on explaining the purpose of the activities in the first few weeks, seventy-three percent agreed (63% slightly, 10% strongly). Finally, and perhaps most significantly, at Item 7 eighty-four percent agreed (57% slightly, 27% strongly) they would make more serious effort to participate actively during the classes if they understood the teaching philosophy behind the activity. This appears to lend weight to the perceived value theory proposed by Williams and Burden, and should serve as food for thought for all teachers.

Practical Ways to Bridge the Gap

Thus far I have argued that, Ministry of Education propaganda notwithstanding, communicative EFL teaching is still a very unfamiliar concept for most first year university students in Japan. Moreover, their educational background renders many of them helpless when confronting something new or unexpected. Being afraid of making mistakes or asking questions, for example, is a major handicap to learning that they must be overtly encouraged to overcome. As well as overcoming the effects of the past, students need to be given more explicit guidance about how to improve their chances of becoming communicatively competent. It seems entirely possible that the majority of students would put more effort into participating actively in fluency-based activities if they could only grasp the rationale behind them. After so many years spent memorizing one fact after another and trying to offer the correct answer to questions, many students are bewildered by the concept that completing a task is not the main point; it's *how* the task is done that is important. The danger is that foreign teachers in Japan can sometimes overlook this, because their educational backgrounds are so utterly different to those of their students. They might, on occasion, mistakenly conclude that a particular student is unwilling to make any effort when, in fact, total inability to grasp the point of the activity is the problem. With this in mind, I would like to propose two simple strategies to help ease students into a communicative classroom environment.

Firstly, in addition to giving the usual brief overview of the course goals and curriculum to

students in the opening class, I would advocate following up on this in the opening ten to fifteen minutes of classes in at least the following three or four weeks of semester one. This would involve trying to implant some basic communicative language teaching principles into the student's minds through repeated exposure to them. Rather than simply embarking on a speech each week (and risk putting some of them to sleep), I propose teaching the principles repeatedly via a series of brief (usually information gap) communicative activities. Students in pairs would have half the relevant information each, and have to ask each other questions to complete a list of the principles. At first the necessary questions could be written on their paper, then the following week only a few key words required for making similar questions would be supplied. In another class, the same list of principles could be passed along different lines (competing teams) of students, one at a time, from the back of the room to the front (then written on the board by the team member at the front) as a kind of "*dengon*" game. Another week the information could be passed on via cloze readings. Students could try filling in the missing words by themselves at first, then check their answers while listening to their partner read his or her half of the passage aloud. Each week the style of activity would be slightly different, but the message the same. Basically, as Offner (1997: 5) puts it, "the better the language students comprehend the learning process and are aware of the key factors which will aid their foreign language studies, the more likely they will succeed".

Secondly, teachers should be wary of expecting too much too soon. In the early weeks of the semester, while the students are coming to grips with communicative principles, they should be eased into the new learning situation with some simple language games, more controlled drills, vocabulary building through brainstorming exercises, and so on. In particular, I would argue that writing (in preparation for speaking) should be given a prominent role.

As I have discussed earlier, our students are not used to talking about themselves or being asked to give an opinion, and in some cases have come to fear doing so (for good reason). It is unrealistic to expect many of them to be even slightly spontaneous (until they have come to realize they are in a non-threatening environment, at least). Most of them have little confidence in their English ability anyway. Furthermore, regardless of nationality or race, not everyone is instinctively talkative. With few exceptions, they have had a narrow range of experience. In other words, they need *time* to think of something to say, and then *more time* to work on how to say it. This is why "free writing" for ten to fifteen minutes before trying to speak can be very helpful. Because they have had a chance to collect their thoughts and prepare themselves, students feel less pressure. Moreover, they can check their dictionaries for necessary vocabulary. By doing so, "students are not just learning "new words", they are learning the *particular* new words that allow them to express their own ideas" (Kaye and Matson 2004: 4).

Once they have something to say, students are then ready to try speaking. An activity I have found to work extremely well is the "speaking line". In a typical class of thirty, you can organize students into four long lines (from left to right, across the room). The eight students in the front row turn around to face the eight behind them, and likewise the seven in the third row face the seven behind them. There should be space for a row of empty seats between rows two and three, which can be used by the teacher for "patrolling" and students who need to move. Having prepared in advance, students know what they want to say, and have some idea of how to say it. They are therefore not allowed to look at their writing, but try to remember the gist of it when they speak with their partners. After a certain amount of time, say three to six minutes, depending on the class, the teacher gives a signal (such as a clapping of hands). Then, the student at the end of one row (in each set of two, facing rows) gets up and moves to the other end, allowing other students in the row to move across one place, thus establishing new pairs. This process can go on a few times, with the students basically going over the same material repeatedly (but with the freedom to improvise or add extra information if they wish).

Because many people are speaking at the same time, there is no need even for nervous students to feel intimidated. Furthermore, it is a good way for the various members of the class to get to know each other, and helps forge a positive atmosphere. Studies of students involved in this kind of activity have "found that students spoke faster and with fewer hesitations in their last turn than in their first turn" (Bresnihan and Stoops 1996: 36). In other words, it develops communicative fluency. (Bresnihan and Stoops also offer suggestions for variations of this type of activity).

Teachers can use the time when students are speaking to listen in on various conversations, scold anyone using Japanese, briefly join conversations occasionally, praise well formed sentences or amusing comments, note any common errors for later discussion, answer questions if asked, and so on.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has to be said that there is no "silver bullet", no single magical way to bring about the perfect classroom every week, in which all students are participating actively and to the best of their ability. There are certain realities such as the overriding priority many students place on part-time jobs, clubs, and so on, the implicit social acceptance of the university-as- "leisure land"- phenomenon found in Japan, and the presence of a few genuinely "unreachable" characters in most classes which make that an impossibility. Nevertheless, avenues for improvement can always be explored. It seems possible that English Communication teachers might draw a positive

response from first year students sooner by spending more time acquainting them with the ideas behind communicative language teaching, and by using activities which allow them to gradually acclimatize to the demands of the class.

Appendix 1

1. *Compared with my high school English classes, I like this English Communication course...*

a. much less b. a little less c. about the same d. a little more e. much more

2. *Compared with my high school English classes, the activities in this course have been ...*

a. about the same b. a little different c. very different

3. *In the first 3 or 4 weeks of this course, my reaction to the activities we did was ...*

a. not at all surprised b. a little surprised c. very surprised

4. *In the first 3 or 4 weeks of this course, I felt I could understand the purpose of the activities ...*

a. not at all b. a little c. quite well

5. *Compared with the first 3 or 4 weeks of this course, I now (at the end of the semester) feel I understand the purpose of the activities ...*

a. no better b. a little better c. much better

6. *During the first 3 or 4 weeks of this course, I would have liked the teacher to spend more time explaining the purpose for doing the activities.*

a. disagree b. agree slightly c. agree strongly

7. *If I understood the teaching philosophy behind the activity, I would try more seriously.*

a. disagree b. agree slightly c. agree strongly

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